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ABSTRACT

This paper presents research results from evaluations of the effectiveness of coalitions, and also presents a discussion of the identified characteristics of effective coalitions, a measurement tool developed to assess coalition effectiveness, and the application of this tool. Characteristics of successful coalitions and partnerships that have been identified are: (1) positive transfer of authority; (2) open and direct communication; (3) open decision making; (4) shared influence over decision making; and (5) participant involvement. The exploration of the relationships among objectives, characteristics, long term outcomes, and indicators of success had resulted in the development of a framework for evaluation. This framework was used to construct a survey instrument that scores the presence of the identified characteristics of coalition effectiveness that is to be completed by managers of the partner agencies. Scores are used to determine the strength of the coalition at the outset of an evaluation and throughout to monitor changes. The approach has been used in three evaluations, one of which is reported as a case study of the use of the instrument. The case coalition is a partnership of four agencies: a large metropolitan hospital, a small drop-in center with a voluntary board, a public health department, and a women's health center. Focus group discussions showed why the changes documented by the survey instrument occurred. Other factors related to the success of a coalition may be incorporated into the instrument. These include a common philosophical base, the role and accountability of the coordinator, an understanding of differences in partner contributions, control of project structure, and control of project space. (SLD)

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Measuring Success in Coalitions

by Mary Thelander and Beth Hoen

Introduction

In evaluating community based programs, we have been asked to determine the effectiveness of coalitions and partnerships. We assisted agency partnerships to identify the management characteristics that enable organizations, communities and program participants to work together in the planning and delivery of community services and to achieve their mutual goals. As well, agencies wanted to know the barriers to working together and how to overcome them, and the strengths of the partnership that were critical to continuing joint programming.

The coalitions we have evaluated are community-based and have as a long-term goal to improve child and/or family health and functioning. The programs target people who are disenfranchised, for example because of poverty, housing, citizenship status, and are isolated by culture and language. The agencies are committed to program participant involvement in the coalitions and are primarily in the health and social services sectors. The coalitions vary in size: an eleven agency coalition, an eight agency coalition and a four agency coalition. The resources available to the coalitions to support the coalition itself and its programming also vary.

In this paper, we present the results of our work with coalitions to measure their effectiveness. The identified characteristics, their definitions, a measurement tool and its application are outlined. As well we present additional factors contributing to successful partnerships that are emerging in our continuing work.

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Development of Characteristics

The characteristics were first developed in 1994 with a coalition of agencies that wanted to understand the development and change in their partnership over time. Working with the managers from each of the partner agencies and the coalition coordinator, we identified and defined characteristics the group hypothesized were critical or essential to a coalition's success.

The characteristics or determinants of success the group identified are consistent with the management philosophy and values of community-based organizations. The characteristics are:

Positive transfer of authority: the successful sharing of control and authority over management and programming of the project by all partners, thus establishing and maintaining the partnership.

Open and direct communication: describes the attitude and behavior of members of the partnership in sharing information. Communication occurs "in the open" at meetings with full participation of the partnership and not secretly outside of meetings.

Open decision-making: describes the way in which all members of the partnership participate in decisions. Decisions are not taken outside of the partnership and imposed.

Shared influence over decision-making: means that all partners are equally respected and involved in decision-making. No partner has greater influence than another.

Participant involvement: means that participants of the programs offered are involved in the decision-making of the partnership and are represented on the partnership committee.

The evaluation framework on the next page is an example of the relationships we have explored between the objectives, characteristics, long term outcomes and indicators of success. The indicators are provided only as examples. They could be used as the basis for information collection in addition to the tool described below which measures the characteristics themselves. In some evaluations, we have added questions about the expected outcomes for the coalition—new networks, coalitions and programs.

Evaluation Framework: Effective Coalitions

Objective

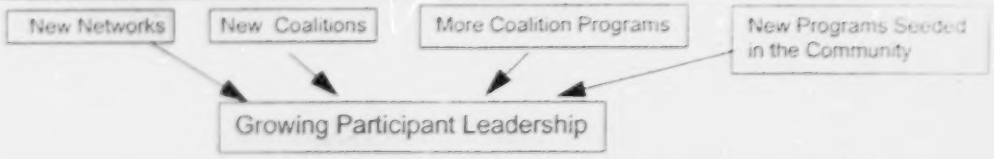
To operate the coalition in a way that supports the effective delivery of programs and achieves the coalition's goals.

Characteristics/ Determinants	Positive Transfer of Authority	Open Communication	Open Decision Making	Shared Influence Over Decisions about: - treatment of clients - program/operational policies - monitoring/ evaluation - human resources - financial policies - public relations - linkages	Participant Involvement
Indicators	Examples: - advisory group role & structure - decision making processes in place	Examples: - local agenda setting - shared minutes	Examples: - everyone knows how decisions are made	Examples: - participant, board/ & staff membership from all partners	Examples: - participants on decision making groups - participant satisfaction in role in decisions

Method

Source: advisory group members, representatives of partnership
Tool: questionnaire to assess characteristics; focus group to explore and analyze responses
Timing: every six months

Expected Outcomes for Coalition



Tool

The survey instrument as shown in the sidebar was developed to score (seven point scale: 1— rarely; 7—usually) the presence of the characteristics. It is to be completed by managers of the partner agencies. Managers score the characteristics at different points in time. The initial scoring serves as the baseline against which change can be shown.

We have used the scores to determine the strength of a coalition at the outset of an evaluation. Focus groups also help a coalition to understand these scores and to determine how they want to change their coalition. Repeat administrations and focus groups help coalitions to monitor the changes occurring.

Partnership Survey

The following six variables are characteristics of successful partnerships. Please rate how consistently your coalition or partnership has achieved these characteristics over the last six months.

1.*Positive transfer of authority* is the successful sharing of control and authority over management and program of the project by all partners, thus establishing and maintaining the partnership.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Rarely Usually

2.*Open communication* describes the attitude and behaviour of members of the partnership in sharing information. Communication occurs "in the open" at meetings with full participation of the partnership, and not secretly outside of meetings.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Rarely Usually

3.*Open decision-making* describes the way in which all members of the partnership participate in decisions. Decisions are not taken outside of the partnership and imposed.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Rarely Usually

4.*Shared influence over decisions* means that all partners are equally respected and involved in decision-making. No partner has greater influence than another.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Rarely Usually

5.*Participant involvement* means that participants of the programs offered are involved in the decision-making of the partnership and are represented on the partnership committee.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Rarely Usually

Mary Thelander & Beth Hoen, May 1997
Please contact us if you plan to use this tool: 416-488-9687, 416-778-4290 or email: bhoen@web.net

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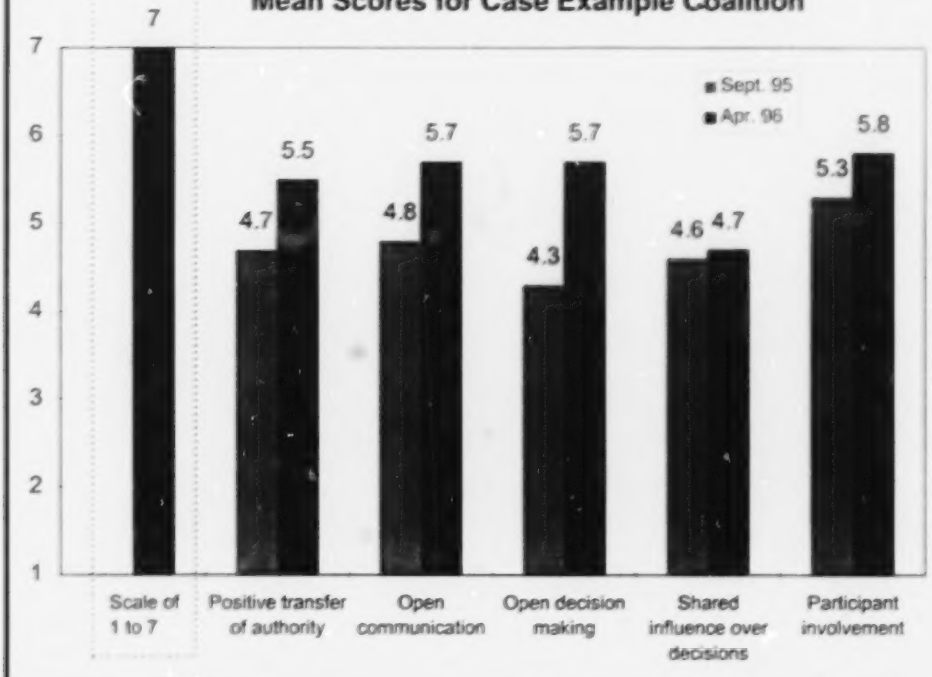
Application

We have used the characteristics of successful coalitions in three evaluations. We are reporting here on one as a case example to show the application and usefulness of the instrument, specifically how using it assisted the case coalition in working together.

The case coalition is a partnership of four agencies; the agencies include a large metropolitan hospital, a small drop-in centre with a voluntary board, a public health department and a women's health centre. The group came together to increase the health and well-being of babies born to women at risk.

Figure 1 shows the scores for two administrations of the survey (September 1995 and April 1996) with the case coalition.

Figure 1.
Characteristics of Successful Coaltions:
Mean Scores for Case Example Coalition



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All but one of the characteristics were scored higher at the second administration. Using a focus group we were able to determine why this improvement in scores occurred.

The change in *positive transfer of authority* was a result of clarification of expectations about what authority could and could not be transferred. This clarity of understanding among the partners was helpful in reaching agreement about what partners could decide together and what individual partners decide. It was accepted that control exercised by some partners was necessary to meet the requirements of their own governing bodies and/or their funders.

Likewise *shared influence over decisions* came to be seen as *open* but not equal. Some partners had more weight than others. As one member said, "I don't see that as bad; some have more experience or knowledge than others". Although decisions were taken by one or another partner, discussion took place about the decision and why it was taken. The characteristic of *open communication*, undertaken frequently, contributed to the perceived success in decision-making.

Related to communication was participation. The active participation of all partners in the project also meant there was commitment and understanding of the project's purpose and the partnership's respective roles. All partners had "doers" at the front-line; consequently many program questions or problems were sorted out "on the spot" with clear knowledge about what was going on.

Active participation meant active recruitment and *involvement of participants* in decisions about the program and its administration. The program provided an honorarium to program participants to enable them to be a part of the partnership and to be "economically valued" as were the other members who were employed by partner agencies. Leadership of participants was valued and participants stated their own sense of empowerment: "no one can fire us".

Other Factors Contributing to Successful Coalitions

We have identified other factors through our continuing work in evaluating coalitions. Over time we may revise our tool as we further examine these factors.

Agreement on a *common philosophical base* contributes to the commitment of a partnership. Partners need to have enough in common or an overlap in their own organizational and sector mandates to support the involvement of their parent organizations. There must be concurrence about why the project is important, what it is achieving and why success is occurring. It is the clarity and agreement about the philosophy, program mandate and program logic model that enables partnerships to be comfortable with transfer of authority, communication and decision-making.

The *role and accountability of the coordinator* are major contributors to the success of a partnership. A coordinator needs to be hired only to coordinate and lead the coalition. Conflicts arise when coordinators have direct service responsibilities. As well, experience has shown that coordinators who are responsive and flexible can facilitate program changes to meet the changing needs of participants.

The coordinator's accountability and reporting relationship to the project is critical in enabling the partnership to work. Her accountability needs to be to the project as a whole and not to one of the partners. As one coordinator said, "No (partner's) voice is any stronger than any other (partner's) voice."

In our experience, partners recognize there are differences between them and variations in the resources they bring to a partnership; however over time, partners learn that these *differences in contribution* do not need to interfere with the functioning of the partnership. For example, in the case presented, the hospital was controller of the funding and a large powerful partner. However, the hospital's relationship with and attitude toward the coalition was different from its relationship with other hospital programs. The coalition project had more latitude and was less intertwined or linked with the hospital decision-making. The philosophy of the coalition program and its community orientation was respected as different but important to the hospital.

Two factors—*control of project structure and control of space*—are also seen as essential to the autonomy of a coalition. Some coalitions believe that as long as the project is not seen as an extension of one agency either through staffing or space, it can remain distinct while making use of contributed space and staffing.

Marketing of the coalition and recognition by the community of policy-makers and funders contributes to the identity of the coalition and its stability. Active marketing to governments about what a coalition does and achieves is essential. A coalition has to have enough meaning that if it were to disband there would be a sense of loss.

Creation of *communication networks,* both computer and personal, are also important to the success of coalitions. Open communication is enhanced by ease of access to partners without constraint by management level or structure. In one coalition, a computer network came to be used and respected as an effective means of communication in addition to meetings, telephone and faxed memos and reports.

Conclusion

Our experience with coalitions leads us to conclude that the characteristics of successful coalitions can be measured and are useful to coalitions in making management changes helpful to achieving their goals.

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